

Big Blunders in Dhamma Interpretation in Sri Lanka

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In the hands of writers on Buddhism in the English language, both as translators of Pali texts and as interpreters of the dhamma, we have witnessed during the last one hundred years or so a reasonably large number of substantially questionable errors. In the hands of translators, they have been for the most part *bona fide* errors, arising out of an inadequacy of knowledge of the language they were handling. In spite of these, we are deeply indebted and ever grateful to those pioneers for the invaluable service they have rendered to the cause Buddhist studies.

In the hands of interpreters, the errors, for the most part, were the result of misunderstanding the strange patterns of thinking of the eastern world to which they were unfortunately aliens and strangers. We are prepared to treat them with sympathetic understanding. We have also adequate reason to believe that some of these errors are also due to a sense of arrogance, arising out of a feeling of intellectual superiority in terms of their religious and philosophical thinking.

In the last three or four decades, i.e. after the World War II, there has been an unimaginable upsurge of Buddhist writing in Sri Lanka, a very wide range of both monks and laymen writing, both in Sinhala and English, on a still wider range of themes connected with Buddhism. They sweep over a vast territory of Buddhist thought and activity like Vipassanā meditation, our unseen world, Bodhi Pūjā, Antarā Bhava, Psychotherapy and Hypnosis. It is very obvious that writers in Sri Lanka come from an un-chartered field with regard to their competence and credibility.

In this area of activity, nobody in the governmental, religious or academic sectors in this country ever feel the need for a bureau of standards to determine the correctness or otherwise of what is said about Buddhism or what is being passed off as Buddhism. In this country, we have pleaded over the decades for this. The Buddha in his death bed set up such an institution, telling his disciples about the claims of each one of them to authority regarding what they say. It is best our Sri Lankan monks and lay community come to learn about these *Mahāpadesā* in the Mahaparinibbana Sutta [DN.II. 124]. The Buddha insisted that what is being said about Buddhism must be tested against the authentic word of the Buddha, i.e. the Dhamma and the Vinaya : *Sutte otāretabbāni Vinaye sandassetabbāni* [Ibid.].

Now our Buddha Gotama, in meeting his physical death at the age of eighty years, and slipping over to what is called his *parinibbāna* [and in that process definitely not reaching anything spiritually higher than at thirty-five] has been dead for more than two thousand five hundred years. And everybody in this country has taken the freedom, we do not need to say whose or from whom, to be able to say and pass off what they like as the word of the Buddha. People at the top, perhaps perched on roof tops or on bamboo poles, are said to be heard saying that Nirvana as the religious goal in Buddhism is to be reached emotionally, via human emotions and not intellectually. In another area, yet some other pundits are known to be saying that those who are observing the eight precepts during their *uposatha* for less than half a day are observing some *sīla*, after all. Being honest to ourselves we would say that much less fraud than this is being practised in the market place.

The main purpose of writing this article today is to bring to light what we would consider to be a devastating howler appearing in one of the latest publications of the Buddhist Publications Society - BPS of Kandy. The book is entitled **Walking the Tight Rope**. The author claims to be a Canadian named David Young. This is how he presents a segment of Buddhism on p. 82 . He tells

us that this is how he had it from Ven. Pemasiri of Kanduboda whom he presents as a distinguished meditation master.

"The third type of action we need to abstain from is sensual misconduct. The Pali expression for abstaining from sensual misconduct is *kamesu michha-cara*. *Kamesu* means craving for objects of pleasure. The word, *kamesu*, is not in the singular form, but the plural form, which means abstinence from sensual misconduct is not only abstinence from one form of sensual misconduct. Abstaining from sensual misconduct does not only mean abstaining from physical sexual misconduct. No. Abstaining from sensual misconduct also means abstaining from abusing any one of the sense doors. For example, if you use your tape recorder to listen to something inappropriate, that is also an abuse of a sense door, your ear, and falls within sensual misconduct. Or perhaps you decide to get drunk, which is an abuse of your tongue, another sense door. Using any sense door inappropriately is sensual misconduct. But today, most people only refer to sexual misconduct."

Just one moment. This looks like what most sophisticated Sri Lankan men and women today call ` a lovely sermon'. We clearly show below how Buddhist doctrines have to be studied and put into practice in our daily lives with an awareness of the religio-cultural milieu in which they had their origin. *Kāmesu micchā-cārā* of the *pañca-sīla* is one specific instance like that. It has a vital role to play regarding the safety, security and honour of the woman in Indian society. Ignoring the religious context, it is unwise for monks or laymen, no matter from which part of the world they come, to wax eloquent on petty issues like the grammatical forms of words as being singular or plural. Here are a few more lines from the page we are quoting.

"Suppose you are a married man and there is another woman who wants to have sex with you, and you want to have sex with her. If you indulge yourself with this other woman and your wife disapproves, your actions are considered an abuse of the senses. If, however, your wife approves of you having sex with the

other woman, doing so is not considered an abuse of the senses. You can go and have sex with the other woman. That is the way. There has to be consensual agreement between the husband and the wife that having an extra-marital affair is permissible. There has to be mutual agreement between both partners."

We would directly and pointedly say that this, no matter who delivers or who interprets this message, as monk or layman, is a gross misunderstanding and misrepresentation, verging on vulgarity, of the third precept of the *pañcasīla* which reads as *kāmesu micchācārā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ*. When viewed in the light of Theravada Buddhist culture and social ethics as laid down in Buddhist teachings, and which we Sri Lankans have inherited, this line of suggested behaviour of sinful connivance within the family circuit, and this insinuation about what is no less than a veiled adulterous crime, appear extremely repulsive and needs to be dreaded and avoided like the Aids virus.

One more word about this prize-winning sentence of the book.

"There has to be consensual agreement between the husband and the wife that having an extra-marital affair is permissible."

About this **consensual agreement** proposed in the book, whether between the husband and the wife, or between the despicable miscreant individuals, the Buddhist teachings have nothing but forthright condemnation. See below the statement from the Vasala Sutta in the Suttanipata.

*Yo ñātīnaṃ sakhānam vā dāresu patidissati
sahasā sampiyena vā taṃ jaññā vasalo iti. Sn. v. 123*

"He who trespasses on the wives of his friends or relatives, either with connivance or use of force, one should look upon him as an outcast or *pariah*."

The total disregard for these Buddhist views reflected in the above statements clearly indicate either a blissful ignorance as to what Buddhism

teaches on this subject of *kāmesu micchācārā* or a vicious intent to distort them.

Authentic Buddhist texts in Pali present to us this subject of *pañca-sīla* in very many places. The identity of each item of these can be easily established by placing these different texts side by side. Here are verses 246 & 247 of the Dhammapada which place the *pañcasīla* in a very vibrant context which no sensible preacher of the dhamma or a listener to it can afford to miss. It is time for some of us in both groups, both monks as well as lay persons, to compulsorily get back to our Montessori Dhamma schools. It is also time for some of our top ranking Sangha leaders in Sri Lanka, no matter of what division, to establish a few. Read carefully the Pali texts we give below.

*Yo pāṇam atipātetī musāvādañca bhāsati
loke adinnam ādiyati **paradārañca gacchati**
surāmerayapānañca yo naro anuyuñjati
idh'eva eso lokasmim mūlaṃ khaṇati attano. Dh.p. vv. 246&247*

The first three lines of the above verses quoted from the Dhammapada are found recurring in the Anguttara Nikaya [at AN. III. 205 f.], with three different lines added to them, stressing that whosoever is guilty of any breaches of these five items of *pañcasīla* not only turns out to be a villain, i.e. *dussīlo* in this very life, but is destined to be born in purgatory or *Niraya* where he has to pay [*paṭisamvedeti*] for the evil he has done. Here too, in the listing of the items of *pañcasīla*, any one with an iota of Buddhist sense in his head cannot fail to see that *paradārañca gacchati* steps in to take the place of *kāmesu micchācārā* without any ambiguity. In fact these verses quoted below proclaim the rewards of safeguarding the five precepts as praise in this life and a blissful birth in the life after. We quote here the Anguttara.

*Yo pāṇam atipātetī musāvādañca bhāsati
loke adinnam ādiyati **paradārañca gacchati**
surāmerayapānañca yo naro anuyuñjati*

*appahāya pañcaverāni dussīlo iti vuccati
kāyassa bhedaṃ duppañño nirayaṃ so upapajjati.*

.....
*pahāya pañcaverāni sīlavā iti vuccati
kāyassa bhedaṃ sappañño sugatiṃ so upapajjati.*

AN.III. 205f.

Any layman, leave alone the monk, will detect with ease that *paradārañca gacchati* [approaching sexually the spouse of another] of the Dhammapada and the Anguttara identifies itself with the regular *pañcasīla* reading *kāmesu micchācārā*. He should do it with far greater ease than a toddler with a Jigsaw. We will now take you to the Dhammika Sutta of the Suttanipata.

*Abrahmacariyam parivajjayeyya
aṅgārakāsuṃ jalitaṃ va viññū
asambhunanto pana brahmacariyaṃ
parassa dāraṃ nātikkameyya. Sn. v. 396*

Here again, one can easily pick up *parassa dāraṃ nātikkameyya* which means 'trespass not on another's spouse' as readily identifiable with *kāmesu micchācārā* as the 3rd precept of the *pañcasīla*. This is enough for the present.

We do not need to and we do not propose to labour any further, writing commentaries on this blatant and scandalous howler, no matter who is held answerable for it. This 3rd precept of the *pañcasīla* refers to nothing other than **impropriety in sexual behaviour** or **sexual misconduct**. Commentators of the succeeding generation always referred to it as *methuna-samācāra* or sexual intercourse. It is not easy, we concede, for aliens of a different religious or cultural ethos to easily understand or appreciate the depth of this Buddhist value judgement of conjugal fidelity. We know what it is like in the world today. Who is promoting what and where? Let us leave them alone. But what is going haywire here with our locals, in our own land, both monks and lay persons, we ask? In

whose hands is our knowledge of the dhamma? In whose hands is our culture?

In 1921, the Sacred Books of the Buddhists, under the editorship of T.W. Rhys Davids understandably mistranslated this concept [*kamesu miccha na caritabba* at DN. III. 63] as 'Ye shall not act wrongly touching bodily desires.' In 1957, the Pali Text Society republished the same, without any change. However, we are glad to publicise with admiration that Maurice Walshe, in 1987 has correctly translated this phrase as 'Do not commit sexual misconduct' on page 398 in his translation of the Digha Nikaya [Thus Have I Heard by Maurice Walshe. Wisdom Publications. London. 1987].

The first outpouring of this blunder, clearly presented in black and white was, as far as we recollect, in Buddhist Ethics by Venerable Hammelewa Saddhatissa. Allen and Unwin, London. 1970. This is his presentation on page 106.

"We now return to the interpretation of the precept as with *kama* in the Locative plural form *kāmesu*. In such form the precept signifies abstinence from all indulgences in the five sensuous objects, namely visible object, sound or audible object, olfactory object, sap or gustative object, and body impression or tactile object. *Kāmesu micchācārā* is therefore 'wrong or evil conduct with regard to the five sensual organs'. In many places in Pali literature, the fifth factor of *kāma*, that is body impression, has been interpreted as 'unlawful sexual intercourse'; it seems that it would be the most blameworthy of the five *kāmas*. In representing *kāmesu micchācārā* as relating only to sexual intercourse the grammatical form of *kāma* has been ignored; to achieve complete observance of the precept, one must therefore desist from the five forms of self indulgence, both directly and indirectly." Who misleads whom, generation after generation?

In countless articles to local news papers and numerous broadcasts over the media, we have, time and again, endeavoured to correct this pet and profitable howler of the Sri Lankans. It does provide adequate cover to some. Are we gleefully awaiting the arrival of Buddha Maitreya to make the necessary

correction?

In fairness to the teachings of the Buddha, we are compelled to request that the BPS, as the publishers of this scandalous howler, produce a correction note with an apology and mail it, without fail, to all recipients of this book in their mailing list. We hope this article would pave the way for it.